**Smile Please**

Director: Vikram Phadnis

Language: Marathi (with English subtitles)

Run time: 2h 14m

In the last decade or so, Marathi cinema has produced a prodigious output of meaningful films, many of them focused on illness, health and medicine. While some of them are brutally real, others blend realism with enough dramatic content and glamour to reach a mainstream audience. Both have their uses. Smile Please (released in theatres in July 2019 and now streaming on amazon prime) belongs to the latter category, having some similarities in plot with the Hollywood film, *Still Alice*. At the centre of the film is Nandini (Mukta Barve), a highly successful fashion photographer. A series of episodes of unexplained forgetfulness leads her to seek medical help and she ends up with a diagnosis of early onset dementia.

To begin with, Nandini does not have it all. Whilst she is immensely successful at work, she is struggling to connect with her teenaged daughter and her world. She oscillates between being confident to the point of abrasiveness at work and diffident to the point of submissiveness as the lesser parent. The illness turns her world upside down. No longer able to work, she retreats into a reclusive life at home, inhabited by an elderly father (Satish Alekar) and long-serving housekeeper (Trupti Khamkar). They enfold her in the banal, but comforting rituals of domestic life. Nandini seems destined to disappear relentlessly into oblivion. But for the intervention of a recently arrived house-guest, Viraj (Lalit Prabhakar), who goads her into reclaiming her life. The film’s climax features a photography exhibition displaying her work, not the slick fashion photographs that she was known for, but vignettes of everyday life in Mumbai.

Smile Please is discreet in its portrayal of dementia. Astu (2015) was more direct and graphic in portraying the most discomfiting manifestations of the disease, loss of propriety and bodily control. Sukhant (2009) was more real in its depiction of the tedium and corporeality of caregiving. Where this film scores is in the nuanced portrayal of the innerscapes of the characters. Nandini clutches desperately, first to preserve her pride and then, simply, her dignity. Even in decline, she is sharp, forthright and unbending. The father slips instinctively into a long-forgotten parenting role, gently meeting her halfway as her dependency on him increases. Only occasionally, does he allow reality to overwhelm him. The ex-husband, Shishir (Prasad Oak) has enough concern and affection to take charge of Nandini’s treatment. But his benevolence is sorely tested when he feels he is losing the monopoly over their daughter’s love and Nandini’s care. A sublimated anger erupts suddenly, descending variously on the daughter, the housekeeper and, mostly, on Viraj, whom he regards as an intrusive outsider. Nupur (Vedashree Mahajan), the petulant and prejudiced daughter is first enticed when she gets a glimpse of her mother’s capacity for happiness and then drawn in by a need to know and accept her mother. Viraj is the only one who had not known Nandini as she was before her illness. Without any preconceptions, he sets about trying to stem her decline, even while he reconstructs her life through her photographs, her father’s reminiscences and newspaper articles.

Their platonic relationship is fragile. Nandini is older, knows she is vulnerable and is on her guard. She does not take kindly to his efforts. Viraj is helped by his remarkable absence of ego. When she throws a retort at him for being condescending, he meets it with a smile. It does not faze him that she never remembers his name. Ever vigilant about threats to her independence, she rebuffs him initially for converting her into a ‘project’. But, later, she decides to embrace his enthusiasm and give in to her need for support, and, above all, friendship.

As Nandini reads out her speech, fitfully and without expression, we are hit by the enormity of her condition. Her own words, penned down in a moment of lucidity, are already not her own at that moment. The film ends on a suitably complex note, leaving the audience with mixed feelings. Can one be oneself without the emotions, memories and cognition that define us. And when that does happen, who are we? Without answering these questions, the film’s message is pragmatic - not to let these endings overwhelm the present.

There are a few jarring notes. Viraj did not have to be depicted as an orphan to explain his unusual capacity for empathy. A key character, Anjali (Aditi Govitrikar), flits in and out of the film, without us knowing who she is, therapist, physician, neurologist? The time-frame is ambiguous. Does the film unfold over a year as it appears to, or over a few years as a character seems to suggest?  As she prepares for the exhibition, suddenly, Nandini seems to become completely symptom-free. An upbeat song, played after the film, somewhat dampens the impact of the nuanced final sequence.

On the other hand, all the actors redeem the film. The accomplished supporting cast plays their respective roles with ease. The performances of the lead actors lift up the film several notches above its treatment.

Lalit Prabhakar brings the right mix of goofiness and sobriety to the part of Viraj. He appears to be suitably non-metropolitan in his demeanour and language, as also his lack of reserve. Not much is demanded of him in terms of emoting through the film, given his character’s easy-going and level nature. But in the last scene of the film, he excels in his depiction of disappointment when he wants to celebrate their shared success and Nandini fails to recognise him. And then when she turns around with a flash of recognition and smiles at him, he is happy, but with the realisation that it may not last.

Mukta Barve is outstanding. She does not overplay any part, whether it is the ambitious professional, the yearning mother or the woman struggling with her progressing illness. We can see the transition of time on her face and in her body language. Yet, while her moods change and faculties decline, her dignity, poise and rich textured voice never let you forget that she is still Nandini. More than anything else, this seems to affirm that she will never lose what she values most, to be herself.